

Competition

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Summary: Prince Adrien Agreste VI has come to the time where he must marry. Marinette Dupain-Cheng is picked to compete in a formal Competition to win the crown and the Prince's heart. However, both Marinette and Adrien seem to have conflicting feelings about love. What will happen when their two paths cross? Will it end in wedding bells? Or tragedy?

1. Chapter 1

****A/N:** Hello! Welcome to my new story! I have been so excited to begin this! This idea comes from the "Selection" series by Kiera Cass. It won't be exactly like the books and will not follow the same characters and plot points, but it will follow the general idea. This is going to be just a teensy tiny bit OOC on the Marinette end. If you haven't read the books, you really should; they're awesome! This is my first Miraculous Ladybug story and I'm super excited to start writing for this fandom! I really hope you enjoy!**

****P.S.** If you are wondering about any of the pronunciations (because I changed a couple of the names of the fictional countries in this), go ahead and ask for it in the review and I'll let you know.**

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Chapter 1

Prince Adrien Agreste VI had always loved the idea of the Competition. It was how his father had met his mother. It was how they fell in love. He had always been excited for that to happen to him one day. He wanted to find his soulmate, just as his father had found his. Adrien never questioned how his "soulmate" would happen to be one in twenty-four girls. Perhaps he had subconsciously marked it off in his head as fate.

Whatever the matter, Adrien had always been waiting for this day. Well... nearly always.

After his mother died in a rebel attack, he lost hope in love. His life grew lonely and dark. His father, who had always been rather distant, never spoke to him after the incident. Adrien realized that his mother had been the person he spent most of his time with and she had always been intent on making sure he was happy. All of a sudden, his happiness was stripped from him. He was a husk, a paper thin prototype of what he had once been.

It was during that time, that period of time when he was alone, that Adrien lost hope in love.

He decided then that he would never be able to find his love, that there was no such thing as true love, and that love was an idea that silly optimists chased their entire lives and never found.

His heart never hardened. It just broke.

Poor Adrien, whose life had been so dark for so long, changed the first day of Competition.

As the girls walked into the processional hall, his world exploded in color.

* * *

><p>"Marinette! Dinner's ready!"<p>

Marinette waved goodbye to Nathanael as she ran towards the bakery. She ran in through the door, slightly out of breath.

"Hello Mama, Papa." She kissed their cheeks and sat down to her plate of chicken and peas. A bowl of soup sat beside her glass of milk. "This is rather, uh... hearty, isn't it?" she questioned, looking up at her parents. They hadn't had a meal this fancy since Christmas.

Her father, Tom, laughed. "It's a special occasion. Don't tell us you forgot what day it is?" Marinette stared back blankly.

"It's the day of the Choosing Ceremony," her mother, Sabine, said taking a sip of wine.

Marinette gasped. She had forgotten all about the Competition. How could she not have remembered the hours of waiting in lines at the processing offices, handing in her forms. Every time a new prince reached the age of marriage, there was a Competition. All girls between the ages of seventeen and twenty-one were to enter their names and information into the running. Marinette, whose age fell just above eighteen, hadn't been worried about being drawn. After being chosen to be Ladybug, she believed that nothing too exciting would happen in her life again. Her being Ladybug was her legacy, her one thing. Fate only picked one thing to happen to you in life, Ladybug had been hers, bada bing, bada boom, been there, done that, that was it.

How wrong had she been.

The Dupain-Chengs crowded around the television, watching in anticipation to see who had been picked for the Competition. Girls were being called left and right, fake crowds erupting in cheers with the press of a button. It was cool to see new types of people. This was the first Competition to ever go international. Marinette had never been outside of Franic. She herself was part Chine on her mother's side, but she hardly knew the language. Only girls who were fluent in the native language of Franic were eligible for Competition. Marinette had heard at school that those in other countries were rigorously tested to see if they knew it.

However, when Marinette's face popped onto the screen, she froze.

This had to be a mistake.

_Had _to be a mistake.

Her big thing had already happened. Ladybug was her big thing. This wasn't possible.

And yet, there her picture was, in all it's smiling glory.

And there was the fake applause.

And there was her name being called out by Prince Adrien.

She was too confused to see his reaction.

She felt her head spin.

"Hooray?" Tom said in a small voice.

* * *

><p>Marinette took a deep breath. In through the nose, out through the mouth, she thought to herself.

She sat on the bed, trying to calm herself down. However, the bed just made it worse. She didn't know what it was made of, but it was extremely plush compared to her springy bed at home. Although it had been made for ultimate comfort, it just made her more uneasy.

The entire room was overdone. High ceilings, thick and silky drapes, a canopy over her blue bed, cream walls, a bathroom that contained a bath fit to be a pool, and a vanity that was so big and so grandiose it could have been the queen's. It all made her uncomfortable and even with the fancy classical music playing down the hall, it felt strange compared to her old pink bedroom with a beaten up desk and a mattress lying on the ground.

"It can't be that bad, Marinette," Tikki said, hovering in front of Marinette's face.

"Oh, Tikki, I hate it here! It's too big. I don't need a bed this big. I don't need a pool in my bathroom. I had everything I needed back home."

Tikki had followed Marinette to the castle. She had to, otherwise how was Marinette supposed to be Ladybug!

"Marinette, I'm sure you'll get used to it eventually," Tikki said trying to calm Marinette down.

In an effort to stop breathing so fast, Marinette changed the subject. "I guess I better unpack."

Marinette put all her clothes in the giant wardrobe, folded and hanged neatly. She was surprised to find that there were some already in there, but brushed it off. She'd wear her clothes on the weekends. She put up a picture of her family on the nightstand next to her bed. In the drawer of the nightstand, she put the box containing her journal and a fountain pen engraved with her name. She tacked up a drawing of her family and friends waving to her. It was drawn by Nathanael. He had handed it to her as she had been saying goodbye.

"You know that you're ruining this extremely expensive wallpaper, right?" Tikki asked, looking in amusement as Marinette pushed the pin into the wall with great effort.

"Yep. And I don't care one bit." After Marinette drove the last pin into the wall she stood back and looked at the picture. It had been drawn in great detail, and it was as precise as a photograph. Her eyes welled with tears.

Finally, she pulled a box out from her trunk. She opened it and looked at the red jewels. The necklace had been in her family for ages. Marinette had never put it on due to the fact that her mother said that it was so fragile and special that she mustn't break it. In fear, Marinette never wore it. She simply kept it for when she had a daughter, so she could pass it down.

She had gotten a letter about a week before she came to the castle and it said in it that the contestants were allowed to keep any valuables in a safe in the room. The only person who knew the code was King Gabriel and everyone knew he had enough power and money to get anything he wanted and he had no interest on some girls' valuables.

Marinette shut the box and locked it in the safe. There was a sudden knock at the door. Tikki hid in Marinette's suitcase.

"Come in," Marinette called wiping at her eyes.

"Hello Miss Dupain-Cheng. I am Claire and I will be your personal maid throughout this Competition. I can't wait to get to know you!" This sounded extremely rehearsed, however Claire sounded like a nice girl. "For now, I have your dress for this evening." She gestured to large garment bag on the carrier behind her. "I can assist you in putting it on."

"Oh, really, it's no problem. I can do it myself," Marinette said. She really wanted some alone time.

Claire laughed. It was a nice laugh, although a little quiet. "I don't think so." Before Marinette could say anything, the dress was laid out in front of her. It was a large, cream ball gown. Layers and layers of silk and tulle flowed to the ground. It cinched at the waist and poofed out. This dress was worth more than Marinette's

entire life.

However, there were some things Marinette would change about the design if she could. The sash was a bit much. Maybe a belt... no then it would look too much like a wedding dress. Actually, now that she thought about it, it already did look like a wedding dress. Maybe it could be a bit more off white... No, then it would be a weird light yellow. The color was fine in the end, more like a dance dress than a wedding dress. The worst thing had to be the tulle and silk. Although beautiful on the body, the two textures clashed to the touch.

"It's very pretty," Marinette said. Which was true. It could just use a bit of work.

"It's one of the King's designs."

Oh. Oops. She took back all of her previous statements.

Marinette had always been enthralled with design and King Gabriel's designs had always been her favorite. The only thing she looked forward to at the castle was seeing the dresses. Specifically, on real people, not models who knew what they were doing.

She realized that she had just criticized her idol's work.

After Claire had tied her up into the corset of the dress, Marinette was sent to the vanity. The makeup artists came in and made her look like a completely different person. Marinette did not know much about makeup, but compared to what the artists were wearing, she felt like hers was rather natural. Then even more stylists came in and they did her hair and her nails and moisturized her skin. There was even a fragrance specialist.

"Is it like this everyday?" Marinette asked Claire.

"Most days," Claire said with a giggle.

Claire was not much older than Marinette and she was soft-spoken at heart. Marinette could tell they wouldn't become best friends, but she knew that they would get along well.

Marinette was only left alone to put on her shoes. They were heels and she spent the next few minutes practicing walking in them until she felt she had it nearly down.

"Great job Marinette!" Tikki cheered on as Marinette walked across the room and back without falling for the fifth time in a row.

"I think I'm starting to get the hang of this..." Marinette said, stumbling to the bed.

There was a knock on the door. Tikki dove for a hidden pocket in the dress. The best thing about Gabriel Agreste's dresses: they always had hidden pockets.

As Marinette lined up near the processional hall with all of the girls, she felt downplayed. Most of the other dresses were extremely extravagant. Maybe it had to do with class. Marinette's family definitely didn't have the most money in Franic.

As the doors to the hall opened wide, little did Marinette know that this was going to be the beginning of the rest of her life.

2. Chapter 2

****A/N:** Hello! Back again! In case you were wondering, I plan on updating every weekend until the summer, because I am super busy right now! When summer does make its way into my life, I will have so much time on my hands and will be able to update all the time! Also, I normally don't address reviews (although I adore receiving them!) but this one just had to be mentioned. Thanks so much to the guest who sent in such an in depth review! The last time I read the books all in a row was probably half a year ago, so I really need to read up again. But wow, thanks so much the advice! I already have some ideas of where I want to go with this (and my little love triangles hehehe), but I'm so happy to have someone reading that so closely knows The Selection! I hope I don't mess anything up! Can't wait to see what all of you think!**

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Chapter 2

The processional hall was just as grand in real life as it was on the television screens. The chandeliers hanging from the ceiling reflected the glow of the candles. The plush red carpets and gleaming marbled floors were foreign to Marinette. She had never seen such jewels as the those the royal court members and nobles wore. The rings and the tiaras and the necklaces and the bracelets and the earrings and the brooches and the dress belts. All of it shown like constellations.

Marinette tried to contain her awe. She was instructed to sit in a huge, gold-embellished chair that was part of a line of other identical chairs. All the girls sat down. The music died down as the king and the prince entered the room. A processional was played, trumpets and trombones and violins blaring away, announcing the arrival of those who needed no announcing. Everyone stood, a tradition Marinette had been taught since a very young age. Although a bit strange, people at home who were watching the event still stood and bowed. Marinette smirked as she saw the other girls struggling to curtsy as the king and the prince sat down. Thank goodness her dress wasn't so tight and form-fitting.

"Good evening to all." The king announced, his voice echoing across the silent hall. "We are here today in honor of the commencement of the Competition. We ask for your support at home. I cannot and will not voice who I believe to be the best option for Queen, but as we have loosened the ties that hold down the people, you may broadcast your opinion of the ladies from your homes." Marinette sighed at these words. This marked the first year that the laws on speech and publication were weakened. It wasn't too big a deal, you still couldn't say things outside of your house, but her parents had rejoiced after being told how to live for so long. No one knew what Prince Adrien's views were, but many crossed their fingers that he was more open-minded than those before him. "My son will now welcome the ladies and give his speech," King Gabriel finished. Everyone politely applauded.

"Thank you, Father, for the lovely welcoming. I am so excited to be participating in the Competition, as I hope all of these ladies are too." Prince Adrien said with a smile. He really was beautiful, even if some people thought boys weren't supposed to be. His eyes glittered like emeralds and he had the kind of face you immediately acknowledged and were drawn to. "I am so happy to see such a diverse group of girls this year! As many of you know, this the first year that we have opened up the Competition to the rest of the world. This is another example of the world reaching its peace." The crowd clapped. Prince Adrien beamed and then continued. "I'd like to welcome our new contestants from Amerie, Chine, Italle, Grec, Russe, and Kingland. It is Franic's pleasure to have you here!" The girl to the left of Marinette blushed and looked down at her hands in her lap. She had milky, pale skin and big brown eyes that fluttered around too fast. "And, of course, we welcome all of the girls from our own home country of Franic." More clapping. Did people really clap this much?

After Prince Adrien finished his speech about the Competition, the girls were sent to dinner in the dining hall. Marinette had never seen such food. Although she her family made an average amount of money, most of it was saved for Marinette's education, even if she didn't want to attend further schooling than she needed to. Marinette sat in the middle of the large table. Some of the more flirtatious girls sat near Prince Adrien, but Marinette didn't really see the point if they were going to be whisked away after they lost. Her mouth watered at the sight of the meats, vegetables, breads, soups, and sauces on her plate. She dug in, savoring the tender taste of food she had never had before. The dessert was so good that she moaned just a tiny bit. Her face reddened after a couple of the girls around her snickered, catching the attention of the prince.

"Is everything all right ladies?" he asked, smiling towards them.

Marinette swallowed and said, "Yes. Just, uh, enjoying the food!" before anyone else could spill of her reaction to the creamy cake.

The girls laughed some more and Marinette quietly ate her cake. She had never been the brute of a joke, but now she knew how awful it was.

After dinner, the girls returned to their rooms. Surprisingly, Claire had disappeared. "Where did your maid go?" Tikki asked, zooming out of the pocket of Marinette's dress.

"I don't know. That's strange. She said she would see me after dinner..." Marinette checked the bathroom. Nothing. "Well, Tikki, I think we should be getting to bed."

"Yeah, I think you're right."

Marinette changed into one of the castle's silk nightgowns and pulled her hair out of its updo. It didn't feel right. None of this felt right. She took off the nightgown and changed into a pair of shorts and t-shirt from home. She crawled into bed, the bed that was not hers and was too comfortable to ever be hers. She sunk her head into the pillows. "Goodnight Tikki," she whispered.

"Goodnight Marinette," Tikki whispered back.

A single tear dripped down Marinette's nose and hit the pillow. She missed home.

* * *

><p>Marinette woke with a start. Tikki had pulled on Marinette's hair to wake her up and pointed to the door. Someone was knocking and calling "Miss Dupain-Cheng?" It was a voice Marinette didn't recognize. Tikki hid under the covers of Marinette's bed. "Come in," Marinette called.<p>

A very short girl around Marinette's age walked into the room. She had the standard maid's uniform on. She had golden-brown eyes and honey-blond hair. She was rather shy and reserved. "Hello, Miss Dupain-Cheng. I am your new maid."

"What happened to Claire?" Marinette questioned.

"Well, there seems to have been a mistake in the Competition. My parents work in the castle, down in the kitchens, but I guess I was never entered and they called my name on accident when it was Claire? I'm sorry, none of it makes sense to me." The girl looked down at the ground, frowning. The skin around her eyes was red. Marinette inwardly gave a sigh of sympathy. The girl had probably always grown up wishing to be out in the Competition and she had been given hope only to have it snatched away. And here Marinette was, crying about going home.

"It's okay though. Now I get to be your maid! So I'm still involved, kind of..." the girl said, trying to instill happiness. "My name is MylÃ"nÃ", by the way."

"MylÃ"nÃ", I'm so sor-"

"Don't worry about it. It was an accident that had nothing to do with you. I'm so happy that I get to be your maid! Now, I'll go run you a bath and you go ahead and get out of bed." MylÃ"nÃ" made her way to the bathroom and Marinette slugged herself out of bed. She put on a dressing-gown and sat down on her bed rubbing her eyes. Tikki was still hidden under the covers.

"Miss Dupain-Cheng, your bath is ready," MylÃ"nÃ" said, on her way out of the bathroom.

"Thank you MylÃ"nÃ". And please, just call me Marinette. No formalities necessary."

"All right. Marinette if you need anything, please give me a ring," MylÃ"nÃ" said, gesturing to the callbox by the dresser. MylÃ"nÃ" exited the door and Marinette got into the bubble-filled bath. Tikki came over and sat on the edge of the sink.

"MylÃ"nÃ" seems nicer than your old maid."

"Yeah, she does. I can't believe Claire is in the Competition. And that they actually kicked MylÃ"nÃ" out. That would be devastating."

Marinette finished her bath and combed through her hair. MylÃnÃ" knocked on her door and Tikki flew behind the photo of Marinette and her parents. MylÃnÃ" blew out Marinette's hair with a dryer and then straightened it. Marinette was put in a sparkling black dress today, simple enough. It had long, lacy sleeves that tapered at the end. It ran down to her knees and a simple tan belt was added to make it look less formal. Marinette put on a pair of tan flats that matched the belt, happy that she wouldn't have to wear heels again until another event.

She walked into breakfast, a couple of girls milling about. Marinette had missed Prince Adrien's breakfast, but then again, she wasn't all too eager at the moment. She ate a berry pastry and drank some tea and then decided to explore the castle. After all, if she was going to go home, she wanted to get the full experience first.

After going down long halls and up creaking stairs, Marinette grew worried. "Uh... Tikki?"

"Yes?" Tikki said, flying out of Marinette's pocket.

"Which way did we go after this stairwell?"

"How should I know? I was in your pocket!"

"Oh no. Oh no, oh no, oh no. MylÃnÃ" said that Prince Adrien was doing interviews today. What if I'm late?"

"What time were the interviews at?" Tikki asked as Marinette ran down the hall to another set of stairs that looked exactly like the last one. She ran down it anyway.

"Eleven." Marinette hadn't seen a single clock in the hallways, but she had left breakfast at five-till-ten and she could tell she had been out for awhile. She ran down another hall. Another staircase. Another set of doors. She ran in random directions until she saw a line of dresses in the distance. Tikki quickly flew back into Marinette's pocket.

Marinette was panting by the time she made it to the girls. They were all sitting in seats by a door. The interview room. A couple girls whispered and giggled. Marinette was just starting to breathe normally again, when the door opened and a girl came out and said, "Mary Beth Dupain-Cheng, you're up next."

"It's Marinette," Marinette said as she walked into the room, smoothing her hair and dress and closing the door behind her.

"You seem to be in a rush." And suddenly, Prince Adrien was sitting in a chair across from her. All of her confidence drained.

"I, um, yeah, uh, um, I... I went for a walk. Yeah, a walk!" God, why was she stuttering?

The prince laughed. "Have a seat," he said.

Marinette curtsied and then sat down. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you Prince Adrien."

"And you, Marinette Dupain-Cheng. So, what was life like back at home?"

"My parents are bakers. They own a bakery in small village to the east. I work there in my spare time."

"Spare time?" Prince Adrien tilted his head in confusion. "What is your main job?"

"Oh, I attend school."

"School? I thought your application said you were eighteen?" Prince Adrien questioned.

"I am. I attend post-secondary school. You know, where you study for a future job."

"Really? I've never heard of that. I apologize for not knowing, maybe I'm really not fit to be king after all." He smiled and scratched the back of his neck.

Marinette's brows furrowed. "Who said you weren't fit to be king?"

Prince Adrien's eyes widened at his mistake. "Nobody," he said too quickly. "So, what do you study."

"Um, psychology."

"Interesting! Do you enjoy it?"

"Well, it's all right, but it's not what I want to do in life."

"What do you want to do then?" Prince Adrien asked.

"I want to be a seamstress. I've always loved sewing and stitching and knitting. I used to make my own clothes before I came here. I'm pretty good at it too. Designing and creating pieces of fashion is just what I do best. It's what I love. His Majesty, your father, he inspired many of my pieces actually. And you're a great model too, by the way."

Adrien was too astonished to thank her for the compliment. "Wait, wait, hold on. You're parents are bakers and they own their own business so that makes you a Four, right?"

Marinette nodded. "It was in the appli-"

"Seamstresses are Sixes. You'd be willing to go down two castes for a _job_?"

Marinette blinked. "Of course. Like I said, it's what I love to do. The caste system doesn't outweigh my passion for it." Marinette rubbed her arm. "As a matter of fact, I rather am not a fan of the caste system."

Silence was all that met her ears. She blushed. She knew she'd said too much. Of course Prince Adrien didn't understand the troubles of the caste system; he was a One after all. Marinette just thought that

if by some chance she did become Queen, she should probably let her beliefs out now before she made it to the end.

"Okay. I can't share what I think, but... okay." He gave her another charming smile.

Shit. She had blown it.

"Oops, looks like we're running out of time. I have one final question." Prince Adrien said. Marinette looked up. "What do you think of the Competition?"

Marinette took a deep breath. She had already lost, she was already gone, so she may as well give her full opinion. "I believe the Competition isn't a real way to find love. I believe that fate won't just float you on a boat to your true love. If love is worth fighting for, then it's also worth finding. I think you'll be happy with whoever you pick, but I don't believe that they'll be the one. I don't even know if there is a one."

Prince Adrien looked at her like she had just proven the theory of everything. He didn't say anything and so Marinette awkwardly got up and made her way to the door. Just as she reached for the doorknob, Prince Adrien said something to her.

"Miss Dupain-Cheng, I must ask you one small thing before you go. Do you wish to be taken out of the Competition?"

She turned so that she could look straight into his green, green eyes.

"No."

She left the room.

* * *

><p>It was after dinner, as Marinette sat in the otherwise empty Women's Room reading a book about adventures, that a girl with bouncy blonde hair came into the room and said, "Well, if it isn't Moaning Marinette."<p>

"And who might you be?"

The girl gasped. "How do you not recognize me? I'm the daughter of the governor! ChloÃ© Bourgeois, model extraordinaire!"

Marinette, after looking through fashion photo shoots all her life, only ever cared to read King Gabriel's fashion magazines, so she had seen Prince Adrien model, but never this girl.

"Sorry, I don't believe I've seen you before. Anyway, how do you know about the dessert thing?" Marinette asked.

ChloÃ© laughed. "Oh please, it's all the girls are talking about. Fantasizing about Prince Adrien, were we? Well, guess what? Not gonna happen! Sabrina!" A girl with bobbed red hair and glasses popped in the room with a smirk and a poster. "Prince Adrien modeled for my father's magazine awhile back. We got pretty close." The poster showed a younger looking ChloÃ© and Prince Adrien. Prince Adrien was

kissing Chloë on the cheek and they were on a beach, advertising a new swimwear line.

"Just so you know Chloë, I'm not actively pursuing Prince Adrien. I'm not someone you have to worry about," Marinette said closing her book.

"Well, you're a measley Four and you weren't one of the fifteen to go, so that obviously means _something_," Sabrina said, sticking her nose up in the air.

Marinette ignored the jab. "Fifteen people left?"

"Duh. Can't you listen? Oh please, you might as well escort yourself out while you still have some dignity. There's no point in staying. The prince would never choose somebody as boring and bland as you. You hold no political beneficial ties. You're boring and average and have low aspirations. We all heard outside the room that you want to be a seamstress. You have no friends. Nobody likes you. There's no point. Why don't you go home and bake some more cookies? This isn't the right place for you. Now move, Sabrina and I need some space to gossip." Chloë flipped her hair at the end of her speech and Marinette got up.

Marinette quickly left the room and walked down the hall. She wiped away a tear. And then another. And another, until she was furiously wiping at her face.

"Marinette? I'll... I'll leave you alone for a bit," Tikki said quietly.

Marinette wanted to say no. She wanted to tell Tikki that she didn't want her to leave. Marinette didn't want to be alone, in fact that was the exact opposite of what she wanted. She wanted her mom and dad to hug her and tell her everything would be all right and she wanted Nathaniel to draw her a picture and she wanted to go back to her normal life. Instead all she said was, "Okay."

* * *

><p>Marinette snuck past the guards and made her way to the gardens. She exited the castle and walked along the winding paths, admiring the flowers and shrubbery. The boom of thunder and a crack of lightning warned her to go inside, but she ignored it. Thus, she walked in the heavy downpour. She was rather thankful for the rain, because she couldn't distinguish if she was crying or if it was the raindrops landing on her face.<p>

She walked into the rosebush maze, ruining her flats. They were caked with mud and her dress was soaking wet, shimmery glitter washed off. She got lost and tried to leave. By now, she was beginning to grow cold. Somehow, she found an exit but it did not look like the way she had entered. She walked down another path that led to a garden of sunflowers. She looked up at them but grew dizzy and fell. Her arms stopped her from hitting the stone of the path. She pushed herself up, realizing how tired she was. She made her way to a bench and sat down.

Did everyone really hate her? Or was Chloë just trying to scare her off? This was all too much for Marinette. She stared at a daffodil

that was too weak to continue standing against the heavy rain. It plopped in the mud, all the other flowers around blowing in the wind.

"You know, the flowers are much prettier in the daytime when it's sunny."

Marinette jolted up from the bench at the voice. It was Prince Adrien.

"Prince Adrien?! I mean, Your Highness?! What are you doing out here?"

"I could ask you the same thing. You know you're not allowed to leave the castle after half-past eight."

Marinette was stunned.

Prince Adrien smiled. "Miss Dupain-Cheng, I believe that you have ruined your dress."

Marinette snapped out of it. "Don't worry, I can pay for it! I think! I don't know how much this costs, but I'll, um, repay you in some way!" She winced. Why was she screaming at the prince?

Prince Adrien laughed. "I'm sorry, Your Highness. I'm not very good at this whole thing..." Marinette mumbled.

"What whole thing?" Prince Adrien asked. Thunder echoed in the distance.

"_This_. The royalty, the dresses, the castle, all of it. It's... it's not me. It's not what I'm used to."

"Do you want to go home?" Prince Adrien asked, his face soft and concerned.

"Why do you care so much if I want to go home or not?" Marinette asked, exasperated.

"I care what you think. If you don't want to be here, I won't force you to stay."

"Why didn't you send me home?"

"Do you want to go home?"

"No! For the last time, I don't want to go home!"

"Well, there's your answer," Prince Adrien said.

"You mean that fifteen girls wanted to go home?" Marinette asked in disbelief.

"Of course not. Only two did. Juleka Wright and Rose Clarke from Kingland. Turns out they were engaged to each other back home and were entered by the government on accident. Isn't that funny?!" Prince Adrien gave a small laugh.

Marinette couldn't help a smile. "How ironic," she said softly.

"The other thirteen girls catered to my opinions and didn't answer my questions. They asked me what I liked and then agreed with whatever I said. You can't have someone like that be the queen. Plus, you... well, you..." Prince Adrien drifted off.

"I what?"

"You... I...um..."

"Your Highness, are you all right?"

Prince Adrien shook his head. "Just Adrien. Please just call me Adrien. I can't stand hearing 'Your Highness' anymore. I want to be Adrien to you. Please. I need a bit more normalcy in my life."

Marinette's mouth hung open. "Okay... A-Adrien. As long as you call me Marinette. Just Marinette. No 'Miss', no surname, none of that. Marinette."

"Okay, Marinette." Adrien said, smiling. "I think I better be heading back to the castle. My bedroom is this way and the ladies' quarters are that way so..." He held out his black umbrella to her. Marinette looked at him in awe. He smiled at her, eyes shining. She cautiously reached for the handle and his fingers brushed against hers in the hand-off. There was a sensation on her hand that was warm and nice and it made her instantly feel better.

However, while she was gawking at a certain prince, the umbrella closed on her, covering her face. This had to be, single-handedly, the most embarrassing thing that had ever happened to her. Adrien laughed, the most real laugh she had ever heard. She pushed the umbrellla back up and giggled a little.

Adrien sighed and smiled at her again. "Good night Marinette."

"Good flight Adrien! I mean good bight, I-I mean could night, I... ugh." He laughed again. Marinette took a breath. "Good night Adrien."

They went their separate ways.

That night as Marinette switched into a castle nightgown, she said "Tikki?"

"Yes Marinette?" Tikki called back, eating a cookie Marinette had snuck from dessert that night.

"I've gotta win this thing."

End
file.